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Come fly with me

The number of international schools could nearly double in the next 10 years according to data from the International School Consultancy Group. But will the supply of teachers keep pace, asks Sunniva Davies-Rommetveit

It's hard to think of a more alluring career than teaching overseas: the weather's usually hotter, the pay and perks can be better, and you get to immerse yourself in a brand new language and culture.

It's not remarkable, then, that over 100,000 British teachers have already taken the leap to work at international schools abroad. What may surprise some, however, is that as new British curriculum schools pop up all over the world, they're finding it increasingly difficult to recruit the teachers they need. Some operators even fear a full-blown teacher shortage lies ahead.



Statistics from the International School Consultancy Group (ISC) illuminate the potential supply-demand imbalance. The number of English medium international schools (see box) has grown substantially since 2000 – from 2,584 to 7,324 this year. The group also predicts that this number could effectively double by 2024, to 14,407 schools.

Such substantial growth is down to a number of factors: the increasingly sought-after education provided by top international schools being one. Anne Keeling of the ISC points out that many of the best schools have waiting lists that "last years", with some parents signing their children up at birth. Schools are no longer the preserve of wealthy expats either; local middle class families increasingly want to send their children to these schools as well.

Another reason is the growing number of school franchises out there, which can be highly profitable for operators. Examples include Dulwich College, which has four international schools in Shanghai, Suzhou, Beijing and Seoul, and Harrow School which has three in Bangkok, Beijing and Hong Kong. Teacher turnover at international schools also tends to be higher than at domestic British schools, with contracts typically lasting just two to three years. The reason? Many teachers want a taste of life overseas, but fewer will commit to staying in a country for the long haul.

Most agree there are still enough teachers to meet demand – but just how long it will remain so is a matter of contention. Paul Howells, chief executive of teacher recruitment firm Eteach, is optimistic. He notes that his website receives 1.4 million visitors each month, and that increasingly there is a "browsing culture" among teachers on the prowl to advance their careers.

But Andrew Wigford, managing director of recruitment firm Teachers International Consultancy, is worried. "For the market as a whole, there currently isn't a shortage of teachers (based on the typical standard and experience required), but if the international schools market continues to grow at its present rate, there could well be a shortage within the next few years."

Teacher-school disconnect

That would be a big, big worry for operators of schools that are enjoying unprecedented levels of demand. It is also more than a little ironic, as there are more and more attractive job roles becoming available to British teachers. For one thing, the vast majority of international schools around the globe teach in English, and some 41% fully or partly use the English National Curriculum, according to ISC data.

So what's stopping more British teachers heading abroad? One major problem is the fact that many teachers aren't aware that such job opportunities exist. "Many teachers in the UK still think of international teaching as TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), and don't realise that working in an international school actually means teaching their specialist subject or age group in an English-medium school," Wigford says.

Perhaps more worrying, though, is that there is a deficit of teachers with the right experience. And in some jurisdictions, such as China, the host government lays down minimum standards governing the qualifications and experience of teachers, notes Kevin McNeany, head of international schools chain Orbital Education.

On top of this, the sort of person willing to uproot and teach abroad may often lack the kind of CV an international school requires. "I worked in international schools when I was young and wanting adventure,"

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says Howells. "However there's sometimes a gap between the type of people these schools would like, and the kind of people willing to go to them." This is not to say that contracts aren't regularly renewed – Howells points to a head teacher who's been in Dubai for seven years having renewed his two-year contract twice.

International schools face a bit of a dilemma, then. Most are, after all, run for profit and need to have the highest teacher quality possible to remain competitive - especially in areas like the United Arab Emirates where the market is highly contested.

Some argue that operators should compensate by improving salaries and packages, so they attract the right talent. But today's packages are already pretty sweet - with many employers offering health, accommodation and travel perks, plus tax-free salaries. At time of writing, E-teach is advertising an elementary teacher and coordinator role at the International School of Monagas in Maturin, Venezuela. On top of a salary of between \$45,000 (£28,700) and \$50,000, it is offering benefits such as fully furnished housing with bills covered, free internet, a yearly round-trip air ticket to visit relatives, health insurance, a settling-in allowance, tuition for school-age dependants and ongoing professional development opportunities. But here's the rub: applicants must have a master's degree, as well as at least two years of teaching experience from their country of origin.

Horses for courses

Another barrier is that not all schools, or locations, are as attractive as others. "We have schools in Mallorca and in Moscow; you might work it out for yourself which one requires the greater incentive!" says McNeany. Recruiting to colder or very remote destinations is particularly tough. Schools in such areas may have to work a lot harder to ensure full capacity in future, says Howells. And making sure packages for teachers are as attractive as possible will be key.

One method schools have adopted is to offer incentives not just for teachers but their families too. This may involve packages for teachers that subsidise or fully pay for their children's school fees. "People don't want to uproot their child every two or three years, and this bypasses the limitation that short contracts can have," Keeling explains.

Something that may also help is that, due to recent regulatory changes, some British schools overseas now offer newly qualified teachers (NQTs) an induction year, or student teacher practice placements. Wigford says the number of international schools approved to offer NQT support should increase in the next few years.

In tackling any emerging shortages, recruiters will play an increasingly important role, by advising both teachers and schools on their options. Currently job fairs are the most common way for teachers to be hired, but they have serious limitations. For example, they quite often involve 'on-the-spot' interviews, "not a great way to pick your next job" suggests Keeling.

There are other more radical solutions emerging. International schools could start teaching some of their modules online in years to come, for example, reducing their dependence on teachers. There are already 300 international schools worldwide that offer online learning options for the International Baccalaureate (IB).

The American International School of Rotterdam is one such school. Speaking for an IB promotional video, Alison Lipp, a secondary principal and curriculum director at the school, says that going online was a "way for us to expand and is a way for us to meet the need of our students". Whether parents will be prepared to pay for this is another question – but Keeling thinks that as long as parents understand that online learning is credible, it should not prove too controversial in future.

These solutions should provide some succour to international schools, but more time and effort is required to avert a full scale staffing crisis. Demand for British schools is skyrocketing in places like the Gulf and Asia, but a staffing crisis would leave operators unable to reap the benefits, in what would be a huge blow for this exciting industry.



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